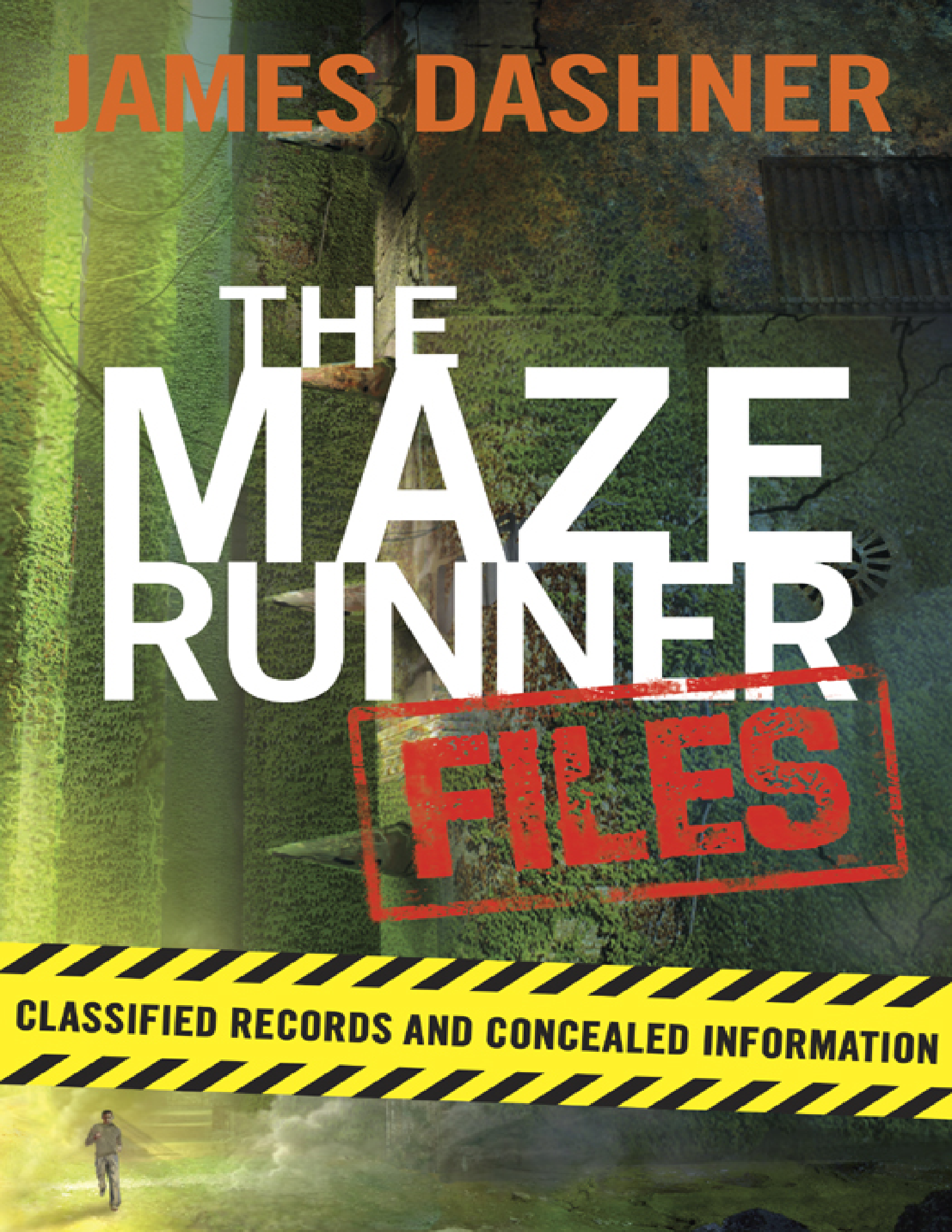
JAMES DASHNER
THE MAZE RUNNER
FILES
CLASSIFIED RECORDS AND CONCEALED INFORMATION

Also by James Dashner

The Maze Runner series

The Maze Runner
The Scorch Trials
The Death Cure
The Kill Order

The Mortality Doctrine

The Eye of Minds

The Maze Runner Files

Classified Records and Concealed Information

James Dashner

Delacorte Press

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FOLLOW THE FLARE PANDEMIC IN

THE MAZE RUNNER TRILOGY

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

BROUGHT TO YOU BY JAMES DASHNER

STOP THE SPREAD OF THE FLARE !!!

Help stop the spread of the Flare. Know the symptoms before you infect your neighbors and loved ones.

The Flare is the virus Flarevirus (V3FLR), a highly contagious manmade infectious disease. Flarevirus was originally created as a biological weapon, protected under government sanction, and held in secure facilities in the Southern area of the former United States of America. The virus was released during the Sun Flare Catastrophe because of massive damage to its quarantined location.

The Flarevirus causes a progressive, degenerative illness of the brain, resulting in uncontrolled movements, emotional disturbances, and mental deterioration. The result has been the Flare pandemic.

Scientists are in late stage clinical trials, but there is no standard treatment for the Flare at this time. The virus is generally lethal, and has been documented as an airborne contagion.

At this time citizens must unite to prevent further spread of this pandemic. By learning how to recognize yourself and others as Viral Contagion Threats (VCTs) you will take the first step in the battle against the Flare.*

The incubation period averages 5 to 7 days, although the onset of symptoms and the severity of those symptoms vary greatly. Aides have been dispensed to all major cities to help identify VCTs. You can recognize these individuals by their red shirts and medical badges. Seek them out if you suspect yourself or someone else of infection.

All government entities have adopted a zero-tolerance policy for dealing with VCTs. Any attempt to hide or conceal symptoms or those exhibiting symptoms will be met with severe punishment. Any discovery of usage of mind-numbing pharmaceuticals to mask symptoms will result in swift and immediate consequences. Any VCTs to report themselves will be treated humanely.

*Any suspicious subjects should be reported immediately to the authorities.

KNOW THE SYMPTOMS !!!

EARLY WARNING SIGNS:

- Changes in personality (irritability, unprovoked anger, indifference, depression)
- Decreased cognitive abilities (difficulty in making decisions, learning new tasks, loss of short term-memory)
- Problems with balance
- Involuntary facial movements

ADVANCED WARNING SIGNS:

- Muscle spasms
- Disorganized and/or aggressive speech
- Auditory hallucinations
- Severe paranoia
- Dementia
- Sudden aggression
- Self-mutilation

Part I

Confidential files

Misc.
Just found this file. Should it be destroyed?
CONFIDENTIAL

WICKED Memorandum, Date 220.6.24, Time 0936
TO: Partners
FROM: Kevin Anderson, Chancellor
RE: Welcome

Welcome, colleagues, to the beginning of the greatest collaborative human effort in the history of our planet. I would not dare suggest that this is a time for excitement. The world has never known such dark times as these, and celebration is far from appropriate. What I would like to establish, however, is that we *can* feel hope and pride that we are a part of something that is working to save the human race. And to succeed, we must hit the ground running.

Those of you in charge of the search parties in the designated Twelve Sectors are to report back to the Council each time a suitable subject is discovered. It is far too early to know what percentage of the population meets our needs, but it has become obvious that the number will be small. We need to test each subject immediately so we can choose Candidates with the greatest potential to last until the very end.

The design team for the Maze will be presenting their latest plans to us tomorrow morning at 0900 hours at command center 3. Building a structure of this sophistication is an ambitious project during the best of times, and given the current state of the world, we anticipate that implementing phase 1 will take the next several years. We will spare no expense to keep the project on track. In a few years we will have our Elite Candidates to help in the final design and building phases.

Tomorrow's meeting will also devote a segment to the biotech creatures we have manufactured to help us create and fully manage the planned Variables.

Our Psychs and doctors have worked to come up with an action plan. They believe that we can achieve sixty percent of the patterns we need by setting in motion the incidents we have plotted so far.

With at least ten years until the project reaches its climax, I think that is an incredible number.

Members of the Council plan to stay in constant communication throughout the entirety of this project, so do feel free to share your thoughts with me or the others on the Council at any time. I am proud to be a part of this great endeavor, along with all of you.

The future has begun.

WICKED Memorandum, Date 221.11.26, Time 1056
TO: Partners
FROM: Kevin Anderson, Chancellor
RE: Elite Candidate

We have discovered a most extraordinary Candidate.

None of us can put a finger on why he seems so perfect to serve as one of our Elites. There is simply something about him. Though very young, he seems to have an awareness of his surroundings well beyond his years. His verbal and cognitive skills are at an adult level, yet somehow he still holds on to an innocence—a childlike quality—that has endeared him to everyone he has met so far.

Preliminary tests show the most promising results we have had thus far. His intelligence and capacity to learn are immeasurable. He also has the potential for incredible physical abilities, which of course will be vital in the Maze if he ends up doing what we would like him to do.

We have decided to name him after one of the most important inventors in history, as we believe strongly that he will go on to achieve great things.

If you would like to observe Thomas, go to room 31J. (Located next to Teresa.) I think you will be impressed.

WICKED Memorandum, Date 224.9.6, Time 1108
TO: Partners
FROM: Kevin Anderson, Chancellor
RE: Implants

One of the most delicate elements of our project is complete. All brain devices, including the Swipe trigger, the manipulators, and the telepathy tools, have been successfully implanted. I am happy to pass on that the doctors reported only seven deaths during surgery. Many fewer than we had feared and anticipated.

Transcript of Subjects A1 and A2, Meeting 1

BEGINNING OF TRANSCRIPT

Thomas: Hey.

Teresa: Hi.

Thomas: Why did they put us in here?

Teresa: I don't know. They wanted us to meet and talk, I guess.

Thomas: How long have you lived here?

Teresa: Since I was five.

Thomas: So …?

Teresa: So four years.

Thomas: You're only nine?

Teresa: Yeah. Why? How old are you?

Thomas: Same. You just seem older is all.

Teresa: I'll be ten soon. Haven't you been here just as long?

Thomas: Yeah.

Teresa: Why do they keep some of us separate? I can hear other kids screaming and laughing all the time. And I've seen the big cafeteria. It's gotta feed hundreds.

Thomas: So they bring your food to your room, too?

Teresa: Three times a day. Most of it tastes like a toilet.

Thomas: So you know what a toilet tastes like?

Teresa: Can't be worse than the food they give us.

Thomas: Heh. You're right.

Teresa: So there must be something different about us, don't you think?

Thomas: I guess. There has to be a reason we're kept alone. But it's hard to guess what when we don't even know why we're here.

Teresa: I know. Is your life pretty much school stuff from wake-up to lights-out?

Thomas: Just about.

Teresa: They keep telling me how smart I am.

Thomas: Me too. It's weird.

Teresa: I think it all has something to do with the Flare. Did your parents catch it before WICKED took you?

Thomas: I don't want to talk about that.

Teresa: Why not?

Thomas: I just don't.

Teresa: Fine, then. Me neither.

Thomas: Why are we in here, anyway? Seriously, what're we supposed to be doing?

Teresa: Talking. Being tested. I don't know. Sorry being around me is so freaking boring for you.

Thomas: Huh? You're mad?

Teresa: No, I'm not mad. You just don't seem very nice. I kind of like the idea of finally having a friend.

Thomas: Sorry. Sounds kind of good to me, too.

Teresa: Then maybe we passed the test. Maybe they wanted to see if we'd get along.

Thomas: Whatever. I quit guessing about things a long time ago.

Teresa: So … friends?

Thomas: Friends.

Teresa: Shake on it.

Thomas: Okay.

Teresa: Hey, does your brain hurt sometimes? I mean, not just like a normal headache, but deep down inside your skull?

Thomas: What? Are you serious? Yes!

Teresa: Shh! Quiet, someone's coming. We'll talk about it later.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

WICKED Memorandum, Date 228.2.13, Time 1842
TO: Partners
FROM: Kevin Anderson, Chancellor
RE: Telepathy Progress

A quick report to all those not directly involved in Project Silence. Of all the elements we debated during the planning stages, this is one that I think we can all agree is an absolute winner. The potential for valuable pattern results from those with implanted abilities is enormous. Though we have not yet officially begun collecting data, we can already see what a boon to the studies Project Silence will be.

Please remember the reasoning we have agreed upon for why the Elites have been given this special gift of communication; it is important in case you ever come into direct contact with them and are questioned. These Candidates are, by nature, very curious—not only about this particular issue, but also about why they are being treated differently from other subjects in all aspects. They have often asked each other about it, and the questions have become constant now that they can speak to one another via telepathy.

Please remember, if questioned, to answer that they have been given the ability to do this for one reason and one reason only: to allow them instant communication as they help us complete the Maze. The irony is that it really *will* help. Quite a bit. I believe we greatly underestimated how smoothly and efficiently the structure will operate with such remarkable workers.

It is vital that these Candidates never learn the truth. Once our subjects know that we have manipulated their brains to such an extent, we will lose the advantage of their oblivious and sincere reactions to the upcoming Variables. Their altered perspective and inevitable suspicion will not only taint the results in the beginning, but will also make it almost impossible to implement the stimulating experiments when we begin feeding them memory retrievals and the like.

Those are the two things I wanted to bring to your attention. First, that the telepathy is working even better than we could have hoped, already proving that it will be invaluable in creating the kinds of situations and Variables we will need throughout the experiment. And second, that we must ensure that Thomas and the others think they have been given this ability merely to assist in their design-and-build efforts.

WICKED Memorandum, Date 229.6.10, Time 2329
TO: Partners
FROM: Kevin Anderson, Chancellor
RE: Spread of the Flare

Due to the increased rapidity of the virus's spread and the outbreak within our own facilities, it seems we may need to rethink the schedule of the Maze experiment. Although it would be ideal to keep to our five-year time line of study and analysis, I suggest we pare back to two years before sending in our catalyst subjects. I've spoken with Thomas, Teresa, Aris, and Rachel; they are in agreement.

I do not believe we will be able to collect all the necessary patterns by the end of this phase. This makes it almost certain that we will be required to implement the second phase we have tentatively planned for. We will achieve results more quickly by accelerating the schedule, though the experiment will be much, much riskier.

The next few months are going to be terribly difficult. I am instituting mandatory testing with the Psychs FOR ALL PARTNERS every other day so we will know when we have reached the point of no return, at which time decommissioning will take place. We cannot let the decline of our minds jeopardize the very project meant to stop such a thing.

Please be sensitive around Thomas and the others. Despite their intelligence and maturity, sometimes we forget how young they are. They will need thick skin to make it through the transition to becoming our replacements; they will have to survive with their emotional and psychological foundations intact or the whole project could be a failure. We must watch them closely.

At this time it is important that we not let hopelessness prevail. We have a chance to save the future. Be diligent. Be decisive. Detach your emotions from the difficulties of the present and

remember what we have held as our mantra from the very beginning: we will do whatever it takes to succeed.

Whatever it takes.

WICKED Memorandum, Date 231.5.4, Time 1343
TO: Partners
FROM: Kevin Anderson, Chancellor
RE: My Farewell to You All

I hope that each one of you will forgive me for doing this in such a cowardly manner, sending you a memo when this is something I should do in person. However, I have no choice. The effects of the Flare are rampant in my actions, embarrassing and disheartening. And our decision not to allow the Bliss within our compound means I can't fake it long enough to say goodbye properly.

Typing these words is difficult enough. But at least I have the ability and time to write and edit in the small windows of sanity left to me.

I do not know why the virus affected me so quickly and so viciously. I deteriorated far more quickly than almost all of the original group. But no matter. I have been decommissioned, and my replacement, Ava Paige, is ready to take charge. The Elites are well into their training to serve as the links between us and those who will continue to run WICKED. Ava herself admits that her purpose is almost that of a figurehead, with our Elite Candidates the true rulers.

We are and will continue to be in good hands. The noble endeavor we began over a decade ago will see itself through to fruition. Our efforts, and for almost all of us, our lives, will have been spent justly and for the greater good. The cure will be built.

Honestly, this is more of a personal note. To thank you for your friendship, your compassion, your empathy in the face of such difficult tasks.

One word of warning: It gets bad in the end. Do not fight your decommission. I did, and now I regret it. Just leave and end the suffering.

It has become too much.

Thank you.

And goodbye.

WICKED Memorandum, Date 231.5.5, Time 0716
TO:
FROM:
RE:

I only have two fingers left.

I wrote the lies of my farewell with two fingers.

That is the truth.

We are evil.

They are kids.

We are evil.

We should stop, let the Munies have the world.

We can't play God.

We can't do this to kids.

You're evil, I'm evil.

My two fingers tell me so.

How can we lie to our replacements?

We give them hope when there is none.

Everyone will die.

No matter what.

Let nature win.

WICKED Memorandum, Date 231.6.22, Time 1137
TO: The Replacements
FROM: Thomas [Subject A1]
RE: The Purge

I take total responsibility for what we have had to do over the last few days.

What we have to keep in mind, though, is that WICKED is alive and stronger than ever. The Maze is up and running and our studies are in full swing. We are on the path and we cannot stray from it.

All I ask is that what we have done here remain within the organization and never be referred to again. What's done is done, and it was a mercy. But now, every waking thought has to be devoted to building the blueprint.

Ava Paige is the new chancellor of WICKED, effective immediately.

WICKED Memorandum, Date 232.1.28, Time 0721
TO: My Associates
FROM: Ava Paige, Chancellor
RE: Regarding Chuck

I wanted to share some quick thoughts about Chuck's death since talk of it is rampant around the compound. Though not surprising, the reaction disappoints me.

We all understand what it is we have been asked to do, and we all knew that we would be expected to do things that are difficult. But WICKED's purpose is about the long term, and everything will have been for nothing unless we accomplish our ultimate goal. Showing small mercies along the way does no one any good.

The Psychs have determined what we need to stimulate our subjects and seek the patterns; their edicts are our first concern. Chuck was a wonderful child full of life and sweet tenderness. Of all our subjects, he may have been the one most likely to earn our sympathies, as well as those of his companions. Ironically, that is the very reason why what happened needed to happen. You saw the results for yourself.

Most importantly, and to ease your conscience, remember that Chuck was not a potential Candidate and most certainly would have met an even worse death eventually. If anything, we *did* show him a mercy by setting up the scenario that led to his murder.

There is not much else to say. I do not need to preach about morals or right and wrong. We are in survival mode, and the only thing that matters is maximizing the number of lives saved *in the long run*. Please visit our in-staff counselors if need be, but then please move on and stay on course for the Scorch Trials. The discussions regarding this matter must cease immediately to keep morale up.

Part II

Recovered Correspondence

To whom it may concern:

We were able to recover the following material from the hard drives of several computers found in the remains of a building. We believe this building was the headquarters for AMRIID—the Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases.

This information is alarming. Please proceed with caution.

TO ALL SURVIVORS OF THE SUN FLARES

The Flares Information Recovery Endeavor, henceforth known as FIRE, hereby calls upon municipal units, police agencies, social services and any surviving governmental entities for help. Because most means of communication have been rendered useless, this flyer is being disseminated to the four corners of the world by any available means, including Netblock, Berg, plane, boat, car, and horse.

So far FIRE comprises representatives from the North American Alliance, Russia, the European Union, the United States of Africa, and Mexico, all countries that have suffered catastrophic damage from the sun flares. We hope to gather more representatives from around the world as quickly as possible.

The globe has been ravaged by this disaster. But now is the time to pull together to do what we have always done: survive. FIRE's first task is to assemble world leaders and collect information. We will then organize governing units, police forces, and food and shelter coordination plans.

If you read this message, please find a way to send word back to the FIRE headquarters in Anchorage, Alaska.

Post-Flares Coalition Memorandum, Date 217.11.28, Time 21:46
TO: All board members
FROM: Chancellor John Michael
RE: Population concerns

The report presented to us today, copies of which were sent to all members of the coalition, certainly left no room for doubt as to the problems that face this already crippled world. I am certain that all of you, like me, went to your shelters in stunned silence. It is my hope that the harsh reality described in this report is now clear enough that we can begin talking about solutions.

The problem is simple: the world has too many people and not enough resources.

We have scheduled our next meeting for a week from tomorrow. I expect all members to come prepared to present a solution, no matter how extraordinary it seems. You may be familiar with an old business saying, “think outside the box.” I believe it is time we do just that.

I look forward to hearing your ideas.

To: John Michael
From: Katie McVoy
Subject: Potential

John,

I looked into the matter we discussed over dinner last night. AMRIID barely survived the flares, but they're confident that the underground containment system for the most dangerous viruses, bacteria, and biological weapons didn't fail.

It took some wrangling, but I got the information we need. I've looked through it and come up with a recommendation. All the potential solutions are far too unpredictable to be usable. Except one.

It's a virus. It attacks the brain and shuts it down, painlessly. It acts quickly and decisively. The virus was designed to slowly weaken in infection rate as it spreads from host to host. It will be perfect for our needs, especially considering how severely limited travel has become. It could work, John. And as awful as it seems, I believe it could work efficiently.

I'll send over the details. Let me know your thoughts.
—Katie

To: Katie McVoy
From: John Michael
Subject: RE: Potential

Katie,

I need your help preparing my full proposal for the virus release presentation. We need to focus on how a controlled kill is the only way to save lives. Though it will make survival possible for only a select portion of our population, unless we take extreme measures, we face the eventual extinction of the human race.

You and I both know how hypothetical this solution is. But we've run the simulations a thousand times and I just can't see any alternative. If we don't do this, the world will run out of resources. I firmly believe it is the most ethical decision—the risk of race extinction justifies the elimination of a few. My mind is made up. Now it's a matter of convincing the others on the board.

Let's meet at my quarters, 1700. Everything has to be worded perfectly, so prepare yourself for a long night.

Until then,
John

To: Randall Spilker
From: Ladena Lichliter
Subject:

I'm still sick from the meeting today. I just can't believe it. I can't accept that the PCC actually looked us in the eyes and presented that proposal. Seriously. I was stunned.

And then more than half the room AGREED WITH THEM! They supported it! What the hell is going on? Randall, tell me what the HELL is going on? How can we even THINK about doing something like that? How?

I've spent the afternoon trying to make sense of it all. I can't take it. I can't.

How did we get here?

Come see me tonight. Please.
—LL

Post-Flares Coalition Memorandum, Date 219.02.12, Time 19:32
TO: All board members
FROM: Chancellor John Michael
RE: EO draft

Please give me your thoughts on the following draft. The final order will go out tomorrow.

Executive Order #13 of the Post-Flares Coalition, by recommendation of the Population Control Committee, to be considered TOP-SECRET, of the highest priority, on penalty of capital punishment.

We the Coalition hereby grant the PCC express permission to fully implement their PC Initiative #1 as presented in full and attached below. We the Coalition take full responsibility for this action and will monitor developments and offer assistance to the fullest extent of our resources. The virus will be released in the locations recommended by the PCC and agreed upon by the Coalition. Armed forces will be stationed to ensure that the process unfolds in as orderly a manner as possible.

EO #13, PCI #1, is hereby ratified. Begin immediately.

To: John Michael
From: Katie McVoy
Subject: Potential

John,

We received the following radio message from soldiers at Ground Zero EU: an exchange between a Lieutenant Larsson and a private named Kibucho that began during a helicopter flyover. I have to warn you, it's a little disturbing.

Begin transmission

Larsson: What the *expletive* is that down there? Through that gash in the roof. What's all that movement?

Kibucho: They're supposed to be *expletive* dead by now. It has to be animals or something.

Larsson: No way. But it's too dark. We need to get down there and have a look.

Kibucho: I'll tell them.

Three-minute break in transmission

Larsson: Open the door.

Kibucho: Are you sure?

Larsson: Open the *expletive* door, Private!

Kibucho: Going in.

Two-minute break in transmission

Kibucho: He chopped off my leg! He chopped off my *expletive* leg!

Larsson: What? What the *expletive* are you talking about?

Kibucho: [Garbled response.]

Larsson: Private! What's going on?

Kibucho: Half of them are alive! Get me out!

Larsson: Backup, backup, backup! We need backup in Sector Seventeen of Ground Zero EU immediately!

Kibucho: [Garbled screams.]

Larsson: Holy *expletive*! Holy *expletive*! They're eating him! My God, they're eating him!

Kibucho: [Garbled screams that cut off abruptly.]

Larsson: They have me cornered! Oh, *expletive*, they have me cornered!

End transmission

We need to gather the board.
—Katie

To: Randall Spilker
From: Ladena Lichliter
Subject: Unbelievable

I know you've been sick, but the reports are flying in now. Have you seen any of them? These aren't rumors anymore, Randall. They have at least 27 confirmed sightings of infected groups. The virus didn't kill them! None of the doctors or scientists can nail down what's gone wrong. But most of the people living at Ground Zero locations are completely insane, like animals. They're monsters!

But that's not even the worst part. What has the Coalition terrified is that victims even had time to escape from the remote camps. The Coalition thought the incubation period and onset of death would be much faster. And there are reports of symptoms in citizens outside the hot zones. Everywhere.

Randall, we have a major, major crisis on our hands. They should've listened to us. They should've listened!

God help us.
—LL

To: John Michael
From: Katie McVoy
Subject: Some last words

John,

There's no way we can stop this. You're right. I hate to admit it, but it's true. Every effort we made to prevent the spread was pointless. The virus is jumping bodies every second. We can only hope that the rumors of the presence of Immunes are true. They might be the only chance we've got for survival.

A cure. I can't think of any other possible solution. Somehow, we have to find a cure.

Did you hear what the media has taken to calling it? The Flare. I'm sure it'll stick.

I have it. I know I do. I'm leaving. I don't want to infect anyone.

You were a true friend in this madness.

Goodbye, John.
—Katie

Post-Flares Coalition Memorandum, Date 220.05.01, Time 11:23
TO: All board members
FROM: Chancellor John Michael
RE: Another solution

The killzone. That's their word for the brain now. Where the Flare does its damage and slowly kills you with lunacy. And they already have a nickname for the Immunes, too. The Munies. What utter ridiculousness.

But jargon matters not. What matters is how it all connects. The killzone. The Flare. The Immunes. A world that's in complete catastrophe. We need to find a cure. There is no other way to go forward.

We will meet tomorrow, 0800.
I have an idea.

Part III

Suppressed Memories

Thomas's first memory of the Flare

It had been five days since they'd locked Thomas up in the white room. On that fifth day, after trying his best to go through the routine he'd established—exercise, eat, think, repeat—he decided to lie down and sleep. Let his terrible new world wash away for a while. Exhausted, he faded quickly and images began to bloom in his mind.

Thomas is young—he can't tell how young exactly. He's curled up in a corner, knees pulled up to his chest, shivering with fright. His dad—the man who holds him, reads to him, kisses him on the cheek, hugs him, bathes him—is on a rampage, screaming hateful things and turning over furniture. His mom tries to stop him, but he pushes her away without even seeming to realize who she is. She stumbles, tries to regain her balance, then slams into the wall a few feet from Thomas.

Sobbing, she crawls to him, pulls him into her arms.

"Don't worry, honey," she whispers. "They're coming to take him away. They'll be here soon."

"Who?" Thomas asks. His voice sounds so young, and it breaks his dreaming heart.

"The people who are going to take care of him," she answers. "Remember, your daddy's sick, very sick. This isn't really him doing all of this. It's the disease."

Suddenly Dad spins around to face them, his face aflame with anger. "Disease? Did I just hear you say *disease*?" Each word comes out of his mouth like a poisoned dart, full of venom.

Mom shakes her head, hugs Thomas tighter to her body.

“Why don’t you just say it, woman,” Dad continues, taking a step toward them. His chest is lurching with his attempts to suck in breath, and his hands are clenched into tight fists. “The Flare. Tell the boy how it is. Tell him the truth. Your dad has the Flare, Thomas. It’s comin’ along real nicely.” Another step closer. “Your mom has it, too. Oh yes. Soon she’ll be chewing on her fingers and feeding you dirt for breakfast. Laughing hysterically while she breaks the windows and tries to cut you. She’ll be bat crazy, boy, just like your daddy.”

Another step closer. Thomas squeezes his eyes shut, hoping it’ll all go away. The dreaming part of him doesn’t want to see anymore, either. Wants it to end.

“Look at me, boy,” Dad says with a snarl. “Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

Thomas can’t help it. He always does as he’s told. His dad looks calm now in every way except one: those fists. Fingers and knuckles white.

“That’s good,” Dad says. “Good boy. Look at your daddy. Do I look crazy to you? Huh? *Do I?*”

He shouts those last two words.

“No, sir,” Thomas says, surprised he can say it without shaking.

“Well, you’re wrong, then.” Dad’s face pinches with anger again. “I’m crazy, boy. I’m a madman. I could eat both of you for dinner and love every bite.”

“Stop it!” Mom screams, a sound so loud it pierces Thomas’s eardrums painfully. “You stop it right now! I swear to God I’ll rip your heart out if you touch my son!”

Dad laughs. Not just a chuckle, either. His whole body shakes and he throws his head back as booming laughter pours from him, filling the house with its noise. Thomas has never heard something sound so *wrong* before. But the man keeps it up, laughing and laughing and laughing. “Stop it!” Mom screams again. She repeats it over and over until finally Thomas can’t take it anymore and covers his ears.

Then the doorbell rings, barely loud enough to be heard. But both of his parents go silent. Dad looks in the direction of the front door, his face suddenly showing fear.

“They’re here to get you,” Mom says through a sob. “My sweet, the love of my life, they’re here to get you.”

Thomas woke up.

Frypan, Swipe Removal Operation

Frypan looked up at his nurse, and though nervousness filled his gut, he knew he was doing the right thing and forced himself to relax. He was about to get his memories back. His memories!

He couldn't wait to see his past.

The woman swabbed a spot clean on the side of his neck, then poked the needle into a vein before he could get another word out. There was a sharp sting and then warmth flowed through his body.

"There," she said. "Just rest for a few minutes. We'll lower the mask as soon as you fall asleep."

"How does it work?" Frypan whispered; he couldn't help himself—he wanted answers. "What is the Swipe, anyway?"

"Just relax now" was all she said in response.

Frypan closed his eyes and resolved to shut up. The answers would come soon enough. He breathed deeply, doing his best to follow directions, to calm his nerves. The warmth he'd been feeling expanded as weariness trickled in, pulling him toward sleep.

"You ready?"

Frypan's eyes snapped open to see his nurse staring down at him through what seemed like a white haze. He tried to speak, but only a mumble of something unintelligible came out.

"You look ready," she said. "Just wanted to let you know I'm about to lower the mask. You don't need to do anything—go ahead and close your eyes again. When you wake up you'll remember everything."

He grunted, closed his eyes. He hadn't been this tired in a long time.

Something squeaked, followed by a grating sound, then a few hard clinks. He felt the pads of the mask on his skin. Something whirred, reminding him of the Grievers, which sent a brief spurt of panic through him before it got swallowed by his exhaustion.

Just before he lost consciousness, he swore he could feel cold worms trying to burrow their way into his ears.

* * *

Frypan swam in a pool of darkness.

Somewhere on the outside, in the periphery, he was aware of pain. It bit at his nerves, sliced through his head and brain. But a dullness, the fog of drugs, numbed it, made it a thing he didn't care about.

As he floated in the absence of light, he remembered how others back in the Maze had described the Changing—an awful journey into a swirling white tornado of their imagination. And that was when recalling only a few flashes of memory. They talked about the extreme pain, and he wondered if he was about to go through something like that. He wasn't too keen on the idea—a good burn from the stove was about the worst thing he'd been through before.

Things developed differently than he could've ever guessed.

He floated in an impossible vacuum—with no gravity, no sense of direction or space. Finally an unseen ground solidified below him and his feet touched a hard surface. He pulled himself together and looked around, hoping for a light to banish the darkness that pressed in on him, scaring him.

Something creaked close by and he turned toward the sound, saw an open door, a soft light spilling out to reveal a stone path between him and the entrance to who-knew-where. He knew this all had to

be imagined, that he wasn't actually in this place, seeing what he was seeing. It had to be symbolic, something formed in his imagination to be able to process whatever the doctors were doing to his brain with their mask machine.

He reached the door in just four steps, hesitated in front of it, then pushed it open wider and entered a sea of blackness. As his eyes adjusted, he realized he was in a long hallway that stretched into the distance as far as he could see. The walls, floor, and ceiling were no longer black, but white. They went on until they converged into a single point.

A series of screens was set into the right wall, one about every three feet, seeming to continue as far as the hallway itself did. The screen closest to him suddenly flickered with static; then a moving image formed within its square, perfectly clear and crisp. Frypan stepped closer to get a better look.

A man, standing at a kitchen counter, his arm moving furiously as he mixes something in a bowl. Frypan is sitting on the floor, staring up at this man. His … dad. The man turns to face Frypan, a huge smile on his face. "These are going to be the best pancakes ever eaten by humans. Almost ready!" Frypan laughs.

The screen goes black. Frypan realizes this was his first memory, the earliest his mind can go back; he was maybe three years old. He is remembering his dad, his kind face full of love as he smiled and spoke.

Frypan knows what to do next, reminds himself that it's all imagined—this is how his brain has chosen to give him his life back. He walks to the next screen.

He's sitting in a small pool, splashing and shrieking, crying when too much water gets in his eyes. Warm hands reach down—a woman's hands—and wipe his face; then he begins all over again. A

ball is thrown in and he kicks it. His mom's body keeps appearing and disappearing in the background as she paces back and forth. She's just learned some awful news about the disease spreading across the world.

He doesn't know how all this is so clear from just watching a few images. But it is. He moves on to the next screen.

A little older, helping his dad in the kitchen. They're making stew, chopping up all the veggies and meat. His dad is crying. Frypan knows that his mom has been taken away for further testing, and that they've said his dad will be next.

On to the next screen.

A man in a dark suit, standing by a car. Papers in his fist, a grave look on his face. Frypan is holding hands with his dad on the porch. WICKED has been formed, a joint venture of the world's governments—those that survived the sun flares, an event that happened long before Frypan was born. WICKED's purpose is to study what is now known as the killzone, where the Flare does its damage. The brain.

Frypan is immune. Others are immune. Less than one percent of the population, most of them under the age of twenty. Many people have developed hatred toward those who are immune, call them the Munies and do terrible things out of jealousy. WICKED says they can protect Frypan while they're working toward a cure.

His dad says many things to him. Mostly that he loves him and is so glad that he'll never go through the horrible things they're seeing happen around the world. Madness and murder.

Frypan has no reason to process or think too deeply about the returning memories. They're not like new revelations, things to which he should respond somehow. They've always been there,

inside him. He has already reacted to them. He has been shaped by them. He's not learning. He's not experiencing. He's remembering.

He walks to the next screen, hungry to be himself again.

Minho, Phase 3 Trial

Three days had passed since they'd arrived on the Bergs from the Scorch, and Minho was just about ready to go whacker. He'd been kept in a small dorm room with plenty of food and absolutely nothing to do. Counting the rows on the wallpaper and imagining faces in the swirly patterns of the ceiling had grown old. And he'd heard nothing about Thomas or his other friends.

On the morning of the fourth day, the Rat Man showed up at his door with two armed guards.

"Follow me," he said.

"No hugs and kisses?" Minho asked. "I've missed your ugly face."

"Follow me or you'll be fired upon." Not even a crack in his stone-hard expression.

Minho sighed and did what he was told. He wasn't in the mood to be shot that day. And if he was honest with himself, anything would be better than sitting in that room for one more second.

Minho followed the Rat Man down a long hallway and then into a small chamber that led to several marked doors.

"You're in room number eight," the Rat Man announced. He gestured to the door marked #8.

They stood in silence until Minho asked, "Oh really? And what am I supposed to do in there?"

"A simple test," the Rat Man answered. "Nothing like the Trials before, I assure you. Yours is probably the easiest of all the tests we've created, and I think the shortest. You will be asked one

question and one question only, and the answer will consist of exactly one word. Sound simple enough?"

It sounded *too* simple. "You actually think I could ever trust you, shuckface?"

"Excuse me?" the Rat Man asked.

Minho shook his head. "I swear to God that if you do one more thing to me or my friends, I won't quit fighting until I'm dead."

A smirk appeared on the man's face, enraging Minho even more. "I give you my word that your response alone will dictate what happens. Everything from this point on is voluntary. The Trials are over."

Minho was so angry he almost shook. He knew he had no choice but to do what he was told, and it drove him crazy.

"Are you ready?" the Rat Man asked.

Minho grunted. He walked over to the door marked with an eight and opened it. He was surprised—there was no fancy gadgetry, no complex machines. It was just a small beige room with a single wooden chair in the middle of a brown-tiled floor. A whiteboard hung on the opposite wall, and beside it stood a tall, muscular man dressed in green scrubs and a white lab coat. He had perfectly combed black hair and the worst mustache Minho had ever seen.

"Welcome," the man said. "My name is Lincoln. Please have a seat, facing me."

Curiosity took over. Minho sat in the chair, wondering what to do with his hands, until he finally folded them in his lap.

"Now please observe," Lincoln said in a cold, clinical voice.

The man turned and started writing with his finger on the upper left hand corner of the board, his touch creating a bright red line as he moved.

The first word Lincoln wrote was *Thomas*. Then he moved down a few inches and wrote *Newt*.

Then down again and added *Frypan*, and *Aris* under that. The man shifted to the right and wrote *Harriet* in the upper corner on that side. He moved down and wrote *Sonya*. Then *Teresa*. Then, to Minho's surprise, *Brenda*.

When Lincoln was finished, eight names were printed in red on the board, evenly spaced. He turned to face Minho once again.

"Do you confirm that you are aware of these eight individuals?" Lincoln asked.

Minho rolled his eyes. "Yeah, genius, I know them. The Rat said you'd only ask me one question. Is that it?"

"The actual Experience exercise has not begun. This is what we would call prep work. Please answer the preliminary question and then we will begin the test. Do you—"

"Yes!" Minho yelled. "I know them. What now?"

Lincoln showed no signs of being caught off guard. He calmly responded, "Thank you for confirming."

His eyes flickered to one of the back corners of the ceiling; Minho turned to see what he was looking at. A beetle blade was attached to the wall; its red light made it impossible to miss.

Minho could see the familiar scrawl of WICKED painted on its body. Memories of the Maze flooded in, and he shifted to face Lincoln again.

Of course they'd be observing all this, he told himself. But did they really have to use beetle blades? He hadn't seen those since leaving the Maze.

"Okay, we're ready to begin," Lincoln said loudly. The man returned his full attention to Minho.

"As you've been told, I'm going to ask you one question and one question only. Your response should be limited to one word. I'll pose the question in ten seconds if you're ready."

Minho let out a small laugh to show how absurd the situation was, then nodded. He was ready.

When the allotted time had passed, Lincoln spoke in a grave voice that showed he meant every single word. "Our doctors have determined that we need to dissect the brains of these subjects for a more in-depth study. But we will allow you to spare one of them. Which person do you choose to save? That is your question."

* * *

Five full minutes passed. Minho sat in silence. It couldn't possibly be true. Did WICKED really mean to cut his friends' brains apart?

"Minho," Lincoln said, "I need you to answer the question, but you can take some more time if you need to. I know it must be difficult."

"I'm not going to answer your stupid question," Minho replied, surprised at how much venom was captured in each word.

"This is no game. The people on this list have been used to their fullest extent, and the only value remaining is to study them physically. Your friends will have the honor of donating their lives to the noblest cause ever known to mankind."

Minho said nothing, seething in his chair.

Lincoln persisted. “Be thankful that the Psychs determined that this Trial would be beneficial. At least you get to save *one* of the people you care about.”

Minho broke eye contact and looked down at his hands. He’d been gripping the sides of his chair tightly, he realized. Spots swam before his eyes, blood pounded in his head—almost as if he could hear it running through his veins and to his heart. Of all the many times he’d felt anger since entering the Maze, it had never been like this. Never.

“How much time would you—”

“I don’t need any time!” Minho yelled before the man could finish. “I refuse to answer! If you even touch a single one of them, I swear …”

“I’m afraid you have no choice in the matter,” Lincoln’s voice was firm, and he seemed unfazed.

“Times are desperate, and we need to complete this blueprint. We need those brains for study.”

“I won’t let you do it,” Minho said, suddenly calm. “If one of them gets hurt, I’m done. Take your chances with me, do however many tests you need to, but leave them out of it.”

“That’s simply not an option, Minho. I’m sorry. We need you to make this choice. And we’re willing to take whatever actions necessary to … encourage you to continue volunteering.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

The lines of Lincoln’s jaw tightened. “It means what it means. Now which of these names do you choose?”

“I choose all of them,” Minho said.

“You can choose only one.”

“All of them.”

“One and one only.”

“All.”

Lincoln took a step forward. “I’ll ask it a final time before taking further measures. Which of your friends do you want to save?”

“Every single one.”

Lincoln rushed forward and grabbed Minho by the shirt, pulling him to his feet. “You will choose, now!”

Minho was terrified, but he ignored it. “All!”

Lincoln reared back with his right hand, formed a fist, and punched Minho in the face. Pain burst through his head as he fell to the floor. Lights seemed to flash along the brown tiles a few inches from his eyes. Lincoln grabbed him and pulled him back up, turned him around so they were facing each other once again. His strength was ridiculous; Minho had no chance.

“Which name do you choose?” Lincoln asked him.

Minho’s face felt broken and he tasted blood, but he refused to give up. “I won’t choose!” He spat a wad of red goo onto Lincoln’s face.

The man didn’t flinch; he punched Minho again, but held him up this time so he couldn’t fall.

Another explosion of pain, more lights.

“Minho,” Lincoln said with insulting calm. “Which of the names do you choose?”

“I won’t,” Minho forced out.

Lincoln punched him on the other cheek. Again. Then again. Minho’s head felt like needles and mush.

“Make a choice.” Lincoln spoke between heavier breaths now. “Which one of the names do you choose?”

Minho didn’t get it, couldn’t comprehend how this could all be necessary. The confusion just made him even angrier and more stubborn.

“All of them,” he said, ashamed of how it came out, nothing but a whimper.

“We can do this all day,” Lincoln said. “We’re not leaving and I’m not stopping until you give me an answer. All you have to do is say one name. Just say it! Now, which one! *Say it!*”

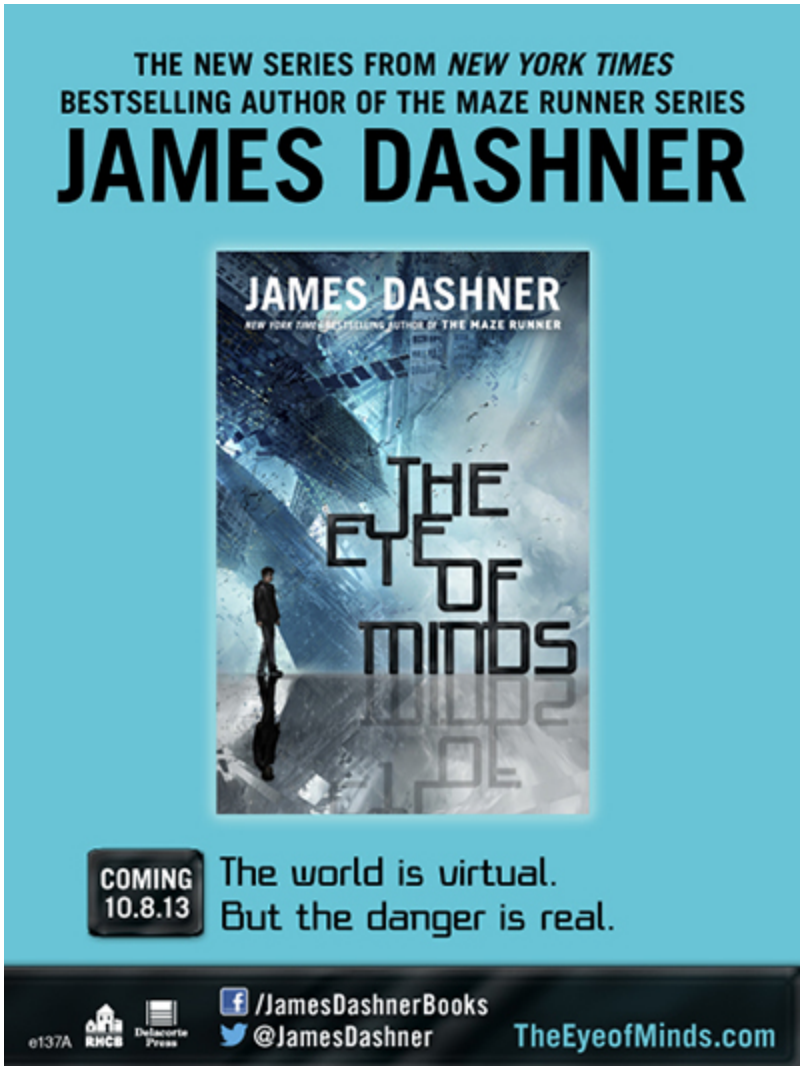
“All of them, you slinthead shuck-faced piece of klunk.” Minho smiled.

Lincoln showed the slightest hint of surprise on his face, but recovered almost as quickly as he had slipped up. He stepped back, smoothed out his clothes.

“The test is over,” the man said. “You’re free to go.”

Stunned and battered, Minho remained speechless as the guards came into the room and escorted him back to his dorm.

Turn the page for a special sneak peek!



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CHAPTER 1

THE COFFIN

1

Michael spoke against the wind, to a girl named Tanya.

"I know it's water down there, but it might as well be concrete. You'll be flat as a pancake the second you hit."

Not the most comforting choice of words when talking to someone who wanted to end her life, but it was certainly the truth. Tanya had just climbed over the railing of the Golden Gate Bridge, cars zooming by on the road, and was leaning back toward the open air, her twitchy hands holding on to a pole wet with mist. Even if somehow Michael could talk her out of jumping, those slippery fingers might get the job done anyway. And then it'd be lights-out. He pictured some poor sap of a fisherman thinking he'd finally caught the big one, only to reel in a nasty surprise.

"Stop joking," the trembling girl responded. "It's not a game—not anymore."

Michael was inside the VirtNet—the Sleep, to people who went in as often as he did. He was used to seeing scared people there. A lot of them. Yet underneath the fear was usually the *knowing*. Knowing deep down that no matter what was happening in the Sleep, it wasn't real.

Not with Tanya. Tanya was different. At least, her Aura, her computer-simulated counterpart, was. Her Aura had this bat-crazy look of pure terror on her face, and it suddenly gave Michael chills—made him feel like *he* was the one hovering over that long drop to death. And Michael wasn't a big fan of death, fake or not.

"It *is* a game, and you know it," he said louder than he'd wanted to—he didn't want to startle her. But a cold wind had sprung up,

and it seemed to grab his words and whisk them down to the bay. “Get back over here and let’s talk. We’ll both get our Experience Points, and we can go explore the city, get to know each other. Find some crazies to spy on. Maybe even hack some free food from the shops. It’ll be good times. And when we’re done, we’ll find you a Portal, and you can Lift back home. Take a break from the game for a while.”

“This has nothing to do with *Lifeblood*!” Tanya screamed at him. The wind pulled at her clothes, and her dark hair fanned out behind her like laundry on a line. “Just go away and leave me alone. I don’t want your pretty-boy face to be the last thing I see.”

Michael thought of *Lifeblood Deep*, the next level, the goal of all goals. Where everything was a thousand times more real, more advanced, more intense. He was three years away from earning his way inside. Maybe two. But right then he needed to talk this dopey girl out of jumping to her date with the fishes or he’d be sent back to the Suburbs for a week, making *Lifeblood Deep* that much further away.

“Okay, look …” He was trying to choose his words carefully, but he’d already made a pretty big mistake and knew it. Going out of character and using the game itself as a reason for her to stop what she was doing meant he’d be docked points big-time. And it was all about the points. But this girl was legitimately starting to scare him. It was that face—pale and sunken, as if she’d already died.

“Just go away!” she yelled. “You don’t get it. I’m trapped here. Portals or no Portals. I’m trapped! He won’t let me Lift!”

Michael wanted to scream right back at her—she was talking nonsense. A dark part of him wanted to say forget it, tell her she was a loser, let her nosedive. She was being so stubborn—it wasn’t like any of it was really happening. *It’s just a game*. He had to remind himself of that all the time.

But he couldn’t mess this up. He needed the points. “All right. Listen.” He took a step back, held his hands up like he was trying to calm a scared animal. “We just met—give it some time. I promise I won’t do anything nutty. You wanna jump, I’ll let you jump. But at least talk to me. Tell me why.”

Tears lined her cheeks; her eyes had gone red and puffy. “Just go away. Please.” Her voice had taken on the softness of defeat. “I’m not messing around here. I’m done with this—all of this!”

“Done? Okay, that’s fine to be done. But you don’t have to screw it up for me, too, right?” Michael figured maybe it was okay to talk about the game after all, since she was using it as her reason to end it—to check out of the Virtual-Flesh-and-Bones Hotel and never come back. “Seriously. Walk back to the Portal with me, Lift yourself, do it the right way. You’re done with the game, you’re safe, I get my points. Ain’t that the happiest ending you ever heard of?”

“I hate you,” she spat. Literally. A spray of misty saliva. “I don’t even know you and I hate you. This has nothing to do with *Lifeblood*!”

“Then tell me what it *does* have to do with.” He said it kindly, trying to keep his composure. “You’ve got all day to jump. Just give me a few minutes. Talk to me, Tanya.”

She buried her head in the crook of her right arm. “I just can’t do it anymore.” She whimpered and her shoulders shook, making Michael worry about her grip again. “I can’t.”

Some people are just weak, he thought, though he wasn’t stupid enough to say it.

Lifeblood was by *far* the most popular game in the VirtNet. Yeah, you could go off to some nasty battlefield in the Civil War or fight dragons with a magic sword, fly spaceships, explore the freaky love shacks. But that stuff got old quick. In the end, nothing was more fascinating than bare-bones, dirt-in-your-face, gritty, get-me-out-of-here real life. Nothing. And there were some, like Tanya, who obviously couldn’t handle it. Michael sure could. He’d risen up its ranks almost as quickly as legendary gamer Gunner Skale.

“Come on, Tanya,” he said. “How can it hurt to talk to me? And if you’re going to quit, why would you want to end your last game by killing yourself so violently?”

Her head snapped up and she looked at him with eyes so hard he shivered again.

“Kaine’s haunted me for the last time,” she said. “He can’t just trap me here and use me for an experiment—sic the KillSims on me. I’m gonna rip my Core out.”

Those last words changed everything. Michael watched in horror as Tanya tightened her grip on the pole with one hand, then reached up with the other and started digging into her own flesh.

2

Michael forgot the game, forgot the points. The situation had gone from annoying to actual life-and-death. In all his years of playing, he’d never seen someone code out their Core, destroying the barrier device within the Coffin that kept the virtual world and the real world separate in their mind.

“Stop that!” he yelled, one foot already on the railing. “Stop!”

He jumped down onto the catwalk on the outer edge of the bridge and froze. He was just a few feet from her now, and he wanted to avoid any quick movements that might cause her to panic. Holding his hands out, he took a small step toward her.

“Don’t do that,” Michael said as softly as he could in the biting wind.

Tanya kept digging into her right temple. She’d peeled back pieces of her skin; a stream of blood from the wound quickly covered her hands and the side of her face in red gore. A look of terrifying calmness had come over her, as if she had no concept of what she was doing to herself, though Michael knew well enough that she was busy hacking the code.

“Stop coding for one second!” Michael shouted. “Would you just talk about this before you rip your freaking *Core* out? You know what that means.”

“Why do you care so much?” she responded, so quietly that Michael had to read her lips to understand. But at least she’d stopped digging.

Michael just stared. Because she *had* stopped digging and was now reaching inside the torn mass of flesh with her thumb and

forefinger. “You just want your Experience Points,” she said. Slowly, she pulled out a small metallic chip slick with blood.

“I’ll forfeit my points,” Michael said, trying to hide his fear and disgust. “I swear. You can’t mess around anymore, Tanya. Code that thing back in and come talk to me. It’s not too late.”

She held up the visual manifestation of the Core, gazed at it with fascination. “Don’t you see the irony in all this?” she asked. “If it weren’t for my coding skills, I probably wouldn’t even know who Kaine was. About his KillSims and his plans for me. But I’m good at it, and because of that … *monster*, I just programmed the Core right out of my own head.”

“Not your real head. It’s still just a simulation, Tanya. It’s not too late.” Michael couldn’t remember a time in his entire life when he’d felt so ill.

She looked at him so sharply that he took a step backward. “I can’t take it anymore. I can’t take … *him* anymore. He can’t use me if I’m dead. I’m done.”

She curled the Core onto her thumb, then flicked it toward Michael. It flew over his shoulder—he saw flashes of sunlight glint off it as it spun through the air, almost like it was winking at him, saying, *Hey, buddy, you suck at suicide negotiations*. It landed with a *plink* somewhere out in the traffic, where it would be crushed in seconds.

He couldn’t believe what he was witnessing. Someone so sophisticated at manipulating code that she could destroy her Core—the device that essentially protected players’ brains while they were in the Sleep. Without your Core, your brain wouldn’t be able to filter the stimulation of the VirtNet properly. If your Core died in the Sleep, you’d die in the Wake. He didn’t know *anyone* who’d seen this before. Two hours earlier he’d been eating stolen bleu chips at the Dan the Man Deli with his best friends. All he wanted now was to be back there, eating turkey on rye, enduring Bryson’s jokes about old ladies’ underwear and listening to Sarah tell him how awful his latest Sleep haircut was.

“If Kaine comes for *you*,” Tanya said, “tell him that I won in the end. Tell him how brave I was. He can trap people here and steal all

the bodies he wants. But not mine."

Michael was done talking. He couldn't take one more word out of this girl's blood-smeared mouth. As quickly as anything he'd ever done in his life, as any character in any game, he jumped toward the pole she clung to.

She screamed, momentarily frozen by his sudden action, but then she let go, actually pushed herself away from the bridge. Michael grabbed for the railing to his left with one hand and reached for her with the other but missed both. His feet hit something solid, then slipped. Arms flailing, he felt nothing but air, and he fell, almost in sync with her.

An incredible shriek escaped his mouth, something he would've been embarrassed about if his only companion wasn't about to lose her life. With her Core coded out, her death would be real.

Michael and Tanya fell toward the harsh gray waters of the bay. Wind tore at their clothes, and Michael's heart felt like it was creeping along the inside of his chest, up his throat. He screamed again. On some level he knew he would hit the water, feel the pain; then he'd be Lifted and wake up back home, safe and sound in his Coffin. But the VirtNet's power was feigned reality, and right now the reality was terror.

Somehow Michael's and Tanya's Auras found each other on that long fall, chest to chest, like tandem skydivers. As the churning surface below rushed toward them, they wrapped their arms around each other, pulling closer together. Michael wanted to scream again but clamped his jaw shut when he saw the complete calmness on her face.

Her eyes bored into Michael's, searched him, and found him, and he broke somewhere on the inside.

They hit the water as hard as he thought they would. Hard as concrete. Hard as death.

The moment of pain was short but intense. Everywhere, all at once, bursting and exploding through Michael's every nerve. He didn't even have time to make a sound before it ended; neither did Tanya, because he heard nothing but the distinct and horrific crash of hitting the water's surface. And then it all dissipated and his mind went blank.

Michael was alive, back in the NerveBox—what most people called the Coffin—Lifted from the Sleep.

The same couldn't be said for the girl. A wave of sadness, then disbelief, hit him. With his own eyes, he'd seen her change her code, rip the Core from her virtual flesh, then toss it away like nothing more than a crumb. When it ended for her, it ended for real, and being a part of it made Michael's insides feel twisted up. He'd never witnessed anything like it.

He blinked a few times, waiting for the unlinking process to be complete. Never before had he been so relieved to be done with the VirtNet, done with a game, ready to get out of his box and breathe in the polluted air of the real world.

A blue light came on, revealing the door of the Coffin just a few inches from his face. The LiquiGels and AirPuffs had already receded, leaving the only part Michael truly hated, no matter how many times he did it—which was way more than he could count. Thin, icy strands of NerveWire pulled out of his neck and back and arms, slithering like snakes along his skin until they disappeared into their little hidey-holes, where they'd be disinfected and stored for his next game. His parents were amazed that he voluntarily let those things burrow into his body so often, and he couldn't blame them. There was something downright creepy about it.

A loud click was followed by a mechanical clank and then a whooshing gust of air. The door of the Coffin began to rise, swinging up and away on its hinges like Dracula's very own resting place. Michael almost laughed at the thought. Being a vicious bloodsucking vampire loved by the ladies was only one of a billion things a person could do inside the Sleep. Only one of a billion.

He stood up carefully—he always felt a little woozy after being Lifted, especially when he'd been gone for a few hours—naked and

covered in sweat. Clothing ruined the sensory stimulation of the NerveBox.

Michael stepped over the lip of the box, thankful for the soft carpet under his toes—it made him feel grounded, back in reality. He grabbed the pair of boxers he'd left on the floor, put them on. He figured a decent person probably would've opted for some pants and a T-shirt as well, but he wasn't feeling so decent at the moment. All he'd been asked to do by the *Lifeblood* game was talk a girl out of suicide for Experience Points, and not only had he failed, he'd helped drive her to do it for real. For *real*, for real.

Tanya—wherever her body might be—was dead. She'd ripped out her Core before dying, a feat of programming, protected by passwords, that she only could've done to herself. Faking a Core removal wasn't possible in the VirtNet. It was too dangerous. Otherwise, you'd never know if someone *was* faking, and people would do it left and right for kicks or to get reactions. No, she'd changed her code, removed the safety barrier in her mind that separated the virtual and the real, and fried the actual implant back home, and she'd done it with purpose. Tanya, the pretty girl with the sad eyes and the delusions that she was being haunted. Dead.

Michael knew it'd be in the NewsBops soon. They'd report that he had been with her, and the VNS—VirtNet Security—would probably come and talk to him about it. They definitely would.

Dead. She was dead. As lifeless as the sagging mattress on his bed.

It all hit him then. Hit him like a fastball to the face.

Michael barely made it to the bathroom before throwing up everything in his stomach. And then he collapsed to the floor and pulled himself into a ball. No tears came—he wasn't the crying sort—but he stayed there for a long time.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROPOSITION

1

Michael knew that most people, when they felt as if the earth itself decided it just didn't like them anymore, when they felt like they were at the bottom of a dark pit, went to their mom or dad. Maybe a brother, maybe a sister. Those with none of the above might find themselves knocking at the door of an aunt, a grandpa, a third cousin twice removed.

But not Michael. He went to Bryson and Sarah, the two best friends a person could ever ask for. They knew him like no one else, and they didn't care what he said or did or wore or ate. And he returned the favor whenever they needed him. But there was something very strange about their friendship.

Michael had never met them.

Not literally, anyway. Not yet. They were VirtNet friends through and through, though. He'd gotten to know them first in the beginning levels of *Lifeblood*, and they'd grown closer and closer the higher up they went. The three of them had joined forces almost from the day they met to move up in the Game of all Games. They were the Terrible Trio, the Trifecta to Dissect-ya, the Burn-and-Pillage-y Trilogy. Their nicknames didn't make them many friends—they'd been branded cocky by some, idiots by others—but they had fun, so they didn't care.

The bathroom floor was hard, and Michael couldn't lie there forever, so he pulled himself together and headed straight for his favorite place on earth to sit.

The Chair.

It was just a normal piece of furniture, but it was the most comfortable thing he'd ever sat on, like sinking into a man-made cloud. He had some thinking to do, and he needed to arrange a meeting with his best friends. He plopped down and looked out the window at the sad gray exterior of the apartment complex across the street. It looked like a dreary rainstorm frozen solid.

The only thing marring the bleakness was a huge sign advertising *Lifeblood Deep*—bloodred letters on a black plaque, nothing else. As if the game designers were fully aware that the words alone were all they needed. Everyone knew them, and everyone wanted in on the action, wanted to earn the right to go there someday. Michael was like every other player—just one of the herd.

He thought of Gunner Skale, the greatest player in *Lifeblood* the VirtNet had ever known. But the man had disappeared off the grid recently—rumor had it he'd been swallowed by the Deep itself, lost in the game he'd loved so much. Skale was a legend, and gamer after gamer had gone searching for him in the darkest corners of the Sleep—fruitlessly, as it turned out. At least, so far. Michael wanted nothing more than to reach that kind of level, to become the world's new Gunner Skale. He just had to do it before the new guy on the scene. This … *Kaine*.

Michael squeezed his EarCuff—the small piece of metal attached to his earlobe—and his NetScreen and keyboard flashed on before him, hovering in midair. The Bulletin showed him that Bryson was already online and that Sarah had said she'd be back in a few.

Michael's fingers began to dance across the shining red keys.

> **Mikethespike:** Hey, Bryson, quit gawkin' at the Gorgozon nests and talk to me. I saw some serious business today.

His friend's response was almost instant; Bryson spent even more time than Michael online or in the Coffin—and typed like a secretary filled with three cups of coffee.

> **Brystones:** Serious, huh? A *Lifeblood* cop bust you at the Dunes again? Remember, they only come by every 13 minutes!

Mikethespike: I told you what I was doing. Had to stop that chick from jumping off the bridge. Didn't go so hot.

Brystones: Why? She nosedive?

Mikethespike: Don't think I should talk about it here. We need to meet up in the Sleep.

Brystones: Dude, it must've been bad. We were just there a few hours ago—can we meet 2morrow?

Mikethespike: Just meet me back at the deli. One hour. Get Sarah there, too. I gotta go shower. I smell like armpits.

Brystones: Glad we're not meeting in real life, then. Not too fond of the B.O.

Mikethespike: Speaking of that—we need to just do it. Meet for real. You don't live THAT far away.

Brystones: But the Wake is so boring. What's the point?

Mikethespike: Because that's what humans do. They meet each other and shake real hands.

Brystones: I'd rather give you a hug on Mars.

Mikethespike: NO HUGS. See you in an hour. Get Sarah!

Brystones: Will do. Go scrub your nasty pits.

Mikethespike: I said I SMELL like them, not … Never mind. Later.

Brystones: Out.

Michael squeezed his EarCuff and watched the NetScreen and keyboard dissolve like a stiff wind had blown through. Then, after one last glance at the *Lifeblood Deep* ad—its red-on-black letters like a taunt, names like Gunner Skale and Kaine floating through his head—he headed for the shower.

2

The VirtNet was a funny thing. It was so real that sometimes Michael wished it wasn't as high-tech. Like when he was hot and sweaty or when he tripped and stubbed a toe or when a girl

smacked him in the face. The Coffin made him feel every last bit of it—the only other option was to adjust for less sensory input, but then why bother playing if you didn't go all the way?

The same realism that created the pain and discomfort in the Sleep sometimes had a positive side, though. The food. Especially when you're good enough at coding to take what you want when you're a little short on cash. Eyes closed to access the raw data, manipulate a few lines of programming, and voilà—a free feast.

Michael sat with Bryson and Sarah at their usual table outside of Dan the Man's Deli, attacking a huge plate of the Groucho Nachos, while back in the real world the Coffin was feeding them pure, healthy nutrients intravenously. A person couldn't rely solely on the Coffin's nutrition function, of course—it wasn't something meant to sustain human life for months at a time—but it sure was nice during the long sessions. And the best part was that you only got fat in the Sleep if you programmed yourself that way, no matter how much you ate.

Despite the delicious food, their conversation quickly took a depressing turn.

"I read it on the NewsBops as soon as Bryson told me," Sarah said. Her appearance in the VirtNet was understated—a pretty face, long brown hair, tan skin, almost no makeup. "There's been a few Core recodings in the last week or so. Gives me the heebie-jeebies. Rumor is that this guy Kaine is somehow trapping people inside the Sleep, not letting them wake up. So some of them kill themselves. Can you believe it? A cyber-terrorist."

Bryson was nodding. He looked like a damaged football player—big, thick, and everything just a little off-kilter. He always said he was so freaking hot in the real world that he needed an escape from the ladies while hanging in the VirtNet. "Heebie-jeebies?" he repeated. "Our good friend here saw a girl dig into her own skull and pull her Core out, toss it, then jump off a bridge. I guess heebie-jeebies is a start."

"Fine—I guess I need a stronger word," she replied. "The point is something's happening, and a gamer's being blamed for it. Who ever

heard of people hacking into their own systems to commit suicide? VirtNet Security has never had this problem before."

"Unless VNS has been hiding it," Bryson added.

"Who would do what she did?" Michael murmured, more to himself than to the others. He knew his stuff, and suicides within the Sleep had always been rare. *Real* suicides, anyway. "Some people like the rush of offing themselves in the Sleep without the real consequences—but I've never seen this before. The skill and knowledge to pull it off … I don't even think I could do it. Now several in a week?"

"And what about this gamer—Kaine?" Bryson asked. "I've heard he's big-time, but how could someone possibly trap others inside the Sleep? It has to be all talk."

The tables around them had just grown quiet, and the name seemed to echo throughout the room. People stared at Bryson, and Michael understood why. Kaine was becoming infamous, and the name made people pale. Over the last few months, he'd been infiltrating everything from games to private meeting rooms, terrorizing his victims with visions and physically attacking them. Michael hadn't heard the part about trapping people until Tanya, but the very name Kaine haunted the virtual world, as if he lingered just out of sight no matter where you went. Bryson was all fake bravado.

Michael shrugged off the other customers in the café and focused on his friends. "She kept saying it was Kaine's fault. That she was trapped by him and couldn't take it anymore. Something about stealing bodies? And things called KillSims. I'm telling you, even before she started on that Core, I could see it in her eyes that she was dead serious. She definitely ran across him somewhere."

"We don't even know much about the guy behind Kaine yet," Sarah offered. "I've read every story on him, and that's all there are—stories. No one has any scoop on the gamer himself. No pics, no audio or video, nothing. It's like he's not real."

"It's the *VirtNet*," Bryson countered. "Things don't have to be *real* to be real. That's the whole point."

“No.” Sarah shook her head. “He’s a gamer. A person. Lying in a Coffin. With all that publicity we should know more about him. The media should be all over this guy. The VNS should be able to track him, at least.”

Michael felt like they were getting nowhere. “Hey, back to me, guys. I’m supposed to be traumatized, and you’re supposed to be making me feel better. So far, you suck at it.”

A look of genuine concern crossed Bryson’s face. “No doubt, dude. Sorry, but glad it was you, not me. I know that whole suicide negotiation thing is part of the *Lifeblood* experience stuff, but who could’ve known yours would be a real one? I probably wouldn’t sleep for a week after seeing something like that.”

“Still sucking,” Michael replied with a halfhearted laugh. In truth, he was better now just being with his friends, but something inside him felt like it was trying to gnaw its way out. Something dark with big teeth that didn’t want him to ignore it.

Sarah leaned over and squeezed his arm. “Neither of us has a clue what it must’ve been like,” she said softly. “And we’d be idiots to pretend. But I’m sorry it happened.”

Michael just blushed and looked at the floor. Thankfully, Bryson brought them back to reality.

“I gotta use the bathroom,” he announced, standing up. A person even did stuff like that inside the Sleep, while your real body took care of business back in the Coffin. Everything was meant to feel real. Everything.

“Charming,” Sarah said through a sigh as she released Michael’s arm and sat back in her chair. “Simply charming.”

3

They talked for another hour or so, ending with their usual promise to meet in the real world soon. Bryson told them if they didn’t do it by the end of the month, he’d start cutting off a finger every day until it happened. Michael’s, not his own. That got a much-needed laugh.

The three of them said their goodbyes at a Portal, and Michael Lifted back to the Wake, going through the usual routine inside the Coffin until he could get out. As he walked over to the Chair, his gaze naturally landed on the big ad for *Lifeblood Deep* outside his window, followed by the usual few seconds of coveting and figurative drooling. He almost sat down but changed his mind, knowing he'd never get up, exhausted and sore head to toe. And he hated falling asleep in the Chair—he always woke up with cricks in places humans weren't meant to have cricks.

He sighed and, trying not to think of the girl named Tanya who'd killed herself right before his eyes, somehow made it over to his bed. Then he collapsed into a long night of dreamless sleep.

4

Getting himself out of bed the next morning was like breaking out of a cocoon. It took twenty minutes for the smart side of his brain to convince the stupid side that taking a sick day at school wasn't a good idea. He'd already been out seven times this semester. One or two more and they'd start cracking down.

He'd only gotten more sore in the night from his plummet into the bay with Tanya, and that strange feeling still turned in his stomach. Somehow, though, Michael made it to the breakfast table, where his nanny, Helga, had just placed a plate of eggs and bacon. A nanny, his amazing VirtNet setup, a nice apartment—he had a lot to thank his wealthy parents for. They traveled a lot, and at the moment he couldn't remember when they'd left or when they were getting back. But they made it up to him with the many things they gave him. Between school, the VirtNet, and Helga, he hardly had time to miss them.

"Good morning, Michael," Helga said with her slight but still noticeable German accent. "I trust you slept well, yes?"

He grunted, and she smiled. That's why he loved Helga. She didn't get all huffy or offended when all you wanted to do was grunt like an animal waking from hibernation. It was no skin off her back.

And her food was delicious. Almost as good as in the VirtNet. Michael finished every morsel of breakfast, then headed out the door to catch the train.

5

The streets were bustling—suits and skirts and coffee cups as far as the eye could see. There were so many people that Michael could almost swear they were doubling like reproducing cells right before his eyes. Everyone had the usual blank, bored look that Michael knew well. Like him, they'd suffer and slog through their dreary jobs or school until they could get back home and enter the VirtNet once again.

Michael entered the flow, dodging commuters left and right, and made his way down the avenue, then turned right at his usual shortcut—a one-way alley full of trash cans and piles of garbage. He couldn't understand why the discarded trash never seemed to actually make it into the big metal containers. But on a morning like this, sharing the street with empty chip bags and discarded banana peels beat the heck out of the marching masses.

He was halfway to the other side of the alley when the screech of tires stopped him in his tracks. The surge of an engine reverberated up the street from behind and Michael spun around. The instant he saw the oncoming car—its paint gray and dull, like a dying storm—he knew. He knew that this car had something to do with him and that it wasn't going to have a happy ending.

He turned and ran, recognizing on some level that whoever was after him had planned to trap him in that alley. The end seemed miles away now; he'd never make it. The sound of the car grew louder as it gained on him, and despite all the strange and crazy things he'd experienced in the Sleep, terror exploded in Michael's chest. Real terror. And he thought, *What a way to end—squashed like a bug in a trash-riddled alley*.

He didn't dare glance behind him, but he could *feel* the approach of the vehicle. It was close, and he had no chance of outrunning it.

He gave up on trying to flee and dove behind the next garbage pile. The car screeched to a halt as he rolled and jumped back to his feet, ready to sprint in the other direction. The rear door of the sedan popped open and out stepped a sharply dressed man with a black ski mask pulled over his head, eyes fixed on Michael through slits in the fabric. Michael froze, just for an instant, but it was long enough. The man tackled him, slamming his body to the ground.

Michael opened his mouth to scream, but a cold hand clamped over his face, silencing him. Panic cut through his body like a hot sword, and adrenaline flooded his system as he twisted and shoved his attacker. But the man was too strong and flipped Michael over onto his stomach, pinning his arms behind him.

"Stop fighting," the stranger said. "No one's gonna hurt you, but we don't have time to mess around. I need you to get in the car."

Michael's face was pressed against the cement. "Oh really? I'll be perfectly safe? I was just thinking that."

"Shut your smart-aleck mouth, kid. We just can't let anybody know who we are. Now get in the car."

The man got to his feet, dragging Michael up with him.

"Your butt," the stranger said, pausing for effect. "In the car."

Michael made one last pathetic attempt to break free, but it was useless. The man's grip was iron-strong. Michael had no choice but to do what he was told. The fight drained out of him, and he let the man guide him to the backseat of the car, where he squeezed in next to another masked man. The door slammed shut and the car lurched forward, the screech of the tires echoing up the walls of the concrete canyon.

6

As the car tore out of the alley and onto the main road, Michael's mind spun—who were these people, and where were they taking him? Another wave of panic washed over him, and he acted. He slammed his elbow into the crotch of the guy to his left, then lunged for the door as the man doubled over in agony, cursing things that

would've made even Bryson blush. Michael's fingers had just curled around the door handle when the original thug yanked him backward, his arm encircling Michael's neck. The man squeezed until Michael was gasping for air.

"Stop it, boy," he said far too calmly. For some reason those were the last words Michael wanted to hear. Anger surged in his chest, and he struggled to break free from the grip.

"Stop it!" the stranger screamed this time. "Stop acting like a child and calm yourself. We're *not* going to hurt you."

"You're actually hurting me right now," Michael coughed out.

The man loosened his grip. "Behave, and that's the worst of it. Do we have a deal, kid?"

"Fine," Michael grunted, because what else could he do? Ask for time to think about it?

The man seemed to relax at that. "Good. Now sit back and shut up," he directed. "Wait, no, first apologize to my friend—that was totally uncalled for."

Michael looked over at the guy to his left and shrugged. "Sorry. Hope you can still have babies."

The man didn't respond, but his glare through the ski mask was fierce. Humbled by the man's anger, Michael looked away. The adrenaline had faded, his strength was exhausted, and he was being driven through the city by four men in black masks.

Things didn't look so bright.

7

The rest of the ride went by in complete silence. Michael's heart, however, continued to thump away like a heavy-metal drumbeat. He thought he'd known fear before. He'd been thrown into countless horrific situations in the VirtNet that had felt perfectly real. But this *was* real. And the fear was beyond anything he'd experienced. He wondered if he would drop dead of cardiac arrest at the ripe old age of sixteen.

As if in mockery, every glance outside seemed to land on those red-on-black *Lifeblood Deep* posters. Even though the tiny optimistic side of his brain kept trying to tell him that somehow he'd get out of this alive, he knew that being kidnapped by masked men usually didn't end well. The signs only reminded him that his dream of reaching the Deep probably wouldn't happen after all.

Finally, they reached the outskirts of the city and turned into the huge parking lot of the stadium where the Falcons played. It was completely empty, and the driver pulled to the very front row, where he stopped and set the emergency brake, the massive structure looming above them. A sign in the front of the parking space read RESERVED. VIOLATORS WILL BE TOWED.

A beep sounded from somewhere in the car, followed by a crack from outside, then the whir of machinery. Immediately afterward the vehicle started to sink into the ground, and Michael's heart leaped. As they descended, the brightness of day quickly melted into fluorescent interior lighting.

Finally, the car came to rest with a soft bump, and Michael looked around to see that they were in a huge underground garage with at least a dozen cars parked along one wall. The driver released the emergency brake and pulled into an empty spot, then cut the engine.

"We're here," the driver announced. Rather needlessly, Michael thought.

8

They offered Michael two options: they could drag him by the feet, facedown, for a close-up view of the cement, or he could walk with them under his own power without trying anything. He chose the second option. As they marched next to him, his heart kept trying to break through his rib cage with its relentless pounding.

The four men escorted him through a door, down a hallway, then through another door into a large conference room. At least, he assumed that was what it was, based on the long cherrywood table,

plush leather chairs, and lit bar in the corner. He was surprised to see only one person waiting for them: a woman. She was tall with long black hair and wide-set, exotic-looking eyes—somehow she was gorgeous and terrifying at the same time.

"Leave him with me," she said. Four words, softly spoken, but the men practically dove out the door, closing it behind them, as if they feared her beyond anything else.

Those striking eyes focused on Michael's face. "My name is Diane Weber, but you'll refer to me as Agent Weber. Please, have a seat." She gestured toward the chair closest to Michael, and it took every ounce of his willpower to hesitate before he sat. He forced himself to count to five, staring at her, trying not to look away. Then he did as she asked.

She came over and sat next to him, then crossed her long, pretty legs. "Sorry for the roughhousing to get you here. What we're about to discuss is extremely urgent and confidential, and I didn't want to waste any time … *asking*."

"I'm missing school. Asking would've worked just fine." Somehow she'd put him at ease, which made him angry. It was clear that she was manipulative, that she used her beauty to melt men's hearts. "What could you possibly want me for, anyway?"

Her smile revealed perfect teeth. "You're a gamer, Michael. With serious coding skills."

"Is that a question?"

"No, it's a statement. I'm telling you why you're here because you asked. I know more about you than *you* do. Understand?"

Michael coughed—had all his hacking finally caught up to him? "I'm here because I'm a gamer?" he asked, struggling to keep his voice steady. "Because I like to dink around in the Sleep and code a little? What'd I do, knock you out of first place somewhere? Steal from your virtual restaurant?"

"You're here because we need you."

The words brought with them a sudden shot of bravery. "Look, I don't think my mom would approve of me dating an older woman. Have you tried the love shacks? I'm sure a good-lookin' gal like yourself could find—"

A look of such quick and sudden anger burned across her face that Michael shut his mouth, then apologized before he had time to think.

"I work for the VNS," she said, calm and cool once again. "We have a serious problem inside the VirtNet and we need help. We're also very aware of your hacking skills, and those of your friends. But if you don't think you can bring yourself to stop acting like a ten-year-old, I'll move on to the next person in line."

Somehow in only three sentences she'd made Michael feel like a complete idiot. And now all he wanted in the world was to know what she was talking about. "Fine, I'm sorry. Getting kidnapped kind of shakes up a dude. From here on out I'll be good."

"That's more like it." She paused, uncrossed and re-crossed her legs. "Now, I'm about to tell you three words, and if you ever repeat these three words to another human being without our explicit direction, the most optimistic outcome for you will be lifetime in a prison that, as far as the general population is concerned, doesn't exist."

Curiosity hummed through Michael, but her words made him pause. "So you won't kill me?"

"There are worse things than death, Michael," she said with a frown.

He stared at her, half wanting to beg her to let him go without saying another word. But his curiosity won out. "Okay. No repeating … Hit me."

Her lower lip trembled slightly when she said it, as if the phrase shook her somewhere deep inside: "The Mortality Doctrine."

9

The room sank into silence—complete and absolute—and Agent Weber stared at him.

What could those three words possibly mean that they could cost him his freedom? "Am I missing something?" he asked. "The Mortality Doctrine? What is *that*?"

Agent Weber leaned forward, her face somehow growing even more intense than before. “Hearing the words has committed you to joining us.”

Michael shrugged—it was the only thing he felt safe doing.

“But I need to hear you say it,” she said. “I need to *hear* your commitment. We need your skills in the VirtNet.”

That little boost of pride brought Michael back to himself a bit. “I want to know what it is.”

“That’s more like it.” She leaned back and the tension in the room seemed to lift. “The Mortality Doctrine. At this moment we know very little. It’s something hidden in the VirtNet—somewhere off the known grid. A file or program of some sort that could seriously damage not just the VirtNet, but the real world as well.”

“Sounds promising,” Michael muttered, immediately regretting it. Luckily, she let it pass. The truth was that he’d perked up at the notion of a secret part of the VirtNet. He wanted to know where it was.

“This … *doctrine* could devastate humanity and the world as we know it. Tell me, Michael, have you heard of the gamer who calls himself Kaine?”

The name made Michael’s heart lurch. The girl, Tanya. Her face came back to him, as well as her words. How Kaine was tormenting her. Michael gripped the sides of his chair because it suddenly felt like he was falling off the bridge all over again. How did all these things relate?

“I know of Kaine,” he said. “I saw a girl kill herself.… She mentioned him.…”

“Yes, we know,” Agent Weber acknowledged. “That’s a small part of the reason you’re here. You’re a witness to how bad things are getting. We’ve been able to tie Kaine to this Mortality Doctrine, and it’s all linked to cases like what you saw happen. People trapped in the VirtNet and driven to decoding their own Cores. It’s the worst cyber-terrorism we’ve ever come across.”

“Why am I here?” Michael asked in a dry croak, feeling an embarrassing lack of confidence. “How can I help?”

She was silent for a beat. “We’ve found people comatose inside their Coffins. CAT scans reveal brain damage—as if they were the victims of some sick experiment. They are complete vegetables.” She paused again. “We have evidence that Kaine’s involved. And somehow it’s all related to this Mortality Doctrine program hidden somewhere inside the VirtNet. We need to find both the man and the Mortality Doctrine. Will you help us?”

She asked it so simply, as if she was asking him to make a quick trip to the store for some milk and bread. Michael wanted to run. Actually, he wanted a lot of things just then—time travel would’ve been great, he thought—but more realistically, he wanted his room and his bed, his Coffin, escape to some brainless sports game, beginner level, Dan the Man Deli, bleu chips, hanging out with Bryson and Sarah, a movie, a book, his mom and dad back from traveling, and to never hear about this again.

But one word popped out of his mouth, and he didn’t know he meant it until he heard himself say it.

“Yes.”

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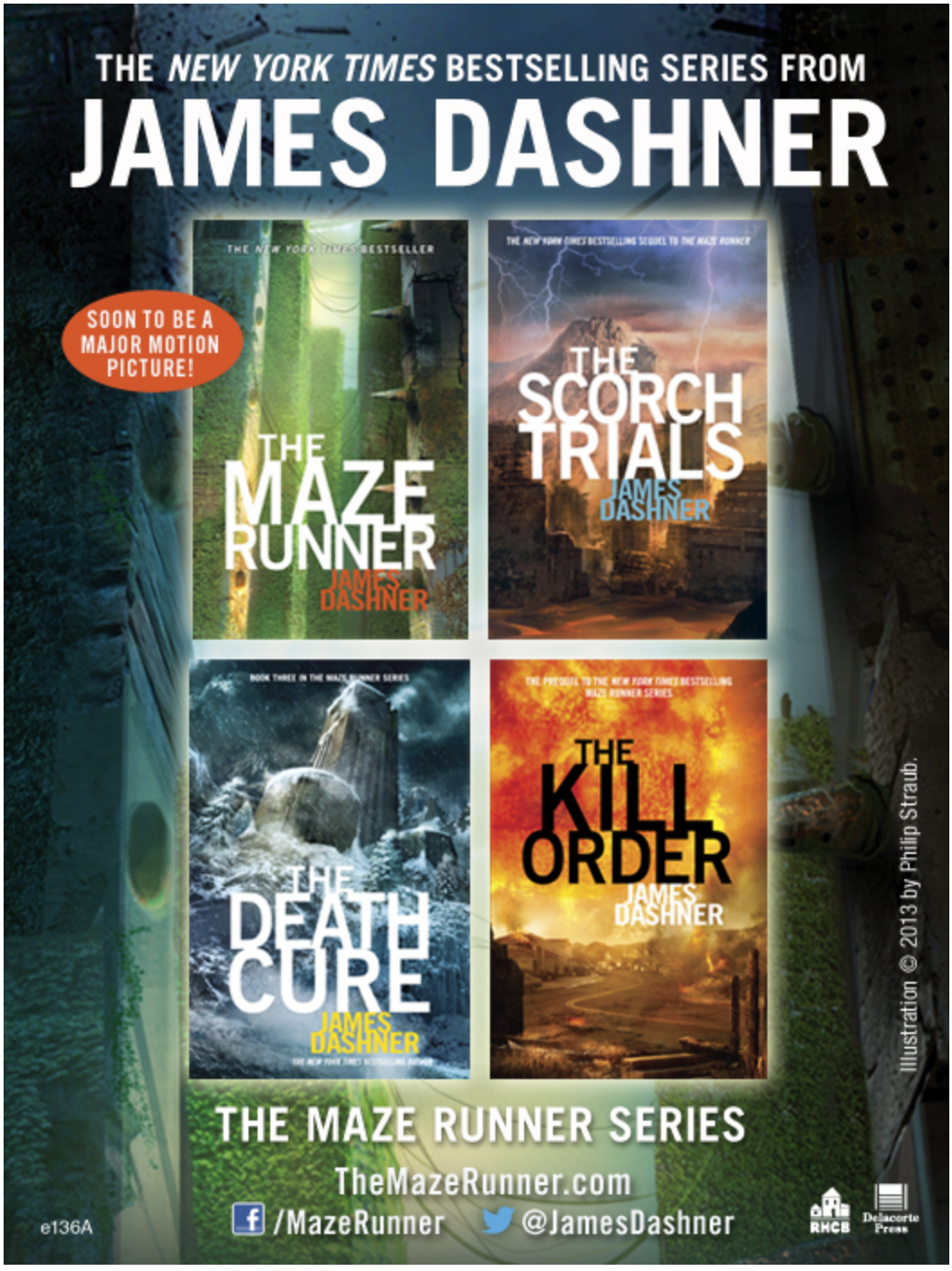
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